

Staff and residents speak out against closure of UK hospital unit

Our correspondent
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Hospital staff and local residents are worried and angered by the threatened closure of the Accident and Emergency (A&E) unit at Trafford General Hospital in Greater Manchester, England.

The hospital, where the National Health Service (NHS) was launched in 1948, also faces the loss of its intensive care unit, children's services and acute surgery.

A final decision will be made later this year following a 14-week consultation period ending October 31. The attack on Trafford General is part of a national closure programme.

A team from the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement by the South West NHS Fightback campaign calling for action committees to be formed to oppose the move by 19 NHS Trusts in southwest England to form a cartel and cut wages and conditions as a testing ground for a national policy. (See SEP statement.)

A retired woman who had attended one of the consultation meetings explained that she had no confidence in the process, as local residents' concerns had not been addressed. She recounted how one of the consultants had asserted that use of the A&E unit was too low and that therefore it was not viable to keep it open. The consultants offered no response when this was challenged by a member of the audience who had waited hours to be seen at 2 a.m., as the department was packed.

Another local resident explained the financial hardship being placed on those already being diverted to other hospitals for treatment: "My wife used to work at Trafford Hospital. I have a problem with my eyes. Once I had to get a taxi to the Manchester Royal Infirmary [MRI], and it cost me £15 to do it."

At the local Urmston shopping centre, a retired print

worker described his attempt to raise the matter with the local Labour MP, Kate Green, who has endorsed the closure:

"We've signed the petition to keep the A&E open. I wanted to see Kate Green about it and was told I could only have 10 minutes. I would need 10 hours to talk about it. This hospital has been getting run down for a while. They built a surgery unit here costing millions, and it only had a few operations before it was closed.

"I've always been an old style socialist, but when I look back, I should have been a communist with the way I think."

He added that that the refusal of politicians to listen would only lead to more riots in future.

The surgical centre on the site of Trafford General Hospital had been run by a private health company, Netcare, until 2010. It was one of a number of independent treatment centres established around the country under the previous Labour government between 2003 and 2010, as the NHS was opened up to the private sector.

Under the scheme, patients were referred to private companies by GPs for operations funded with public money. This provided a windfall for the private companies, while patients' needs were sacrificed. The contracts were drawn up by the Department of Health. The *Health Service Journal* reported in 2011 that £252 million was paid to private providers for operations that were never carried out over a seven-year period. The surgery at Trafford General run by Netcare was the worst example, with £35.1 million handed over for surgery not performed.

The trade unions are complicit in the closure of the A&E unit, having maintained silence over the issue.

Hospital staff and members of the largest public health union, Unison, voiced their criticism.

A member of the hospital catering staff commented, “They are making savings here. The catering here is in-house, but they are looking at getting Sodexo in. It will all be private services. They run catering at MRI, but there have been problems with it, so we don’t know.

“Someone has to stand up. Once a stand is made, it will snowball. The unions are doing nothing, and things are still closing down.

“They shut the maternity here, and not every birth is an easy birth.” Pointing at the nearby housing, she said, “What about these people who live across the road? They could come here and be told we don’t have the facilities. So then they have to send them off to MRI and Wythenshawe, miles away.”

A health care assistant who was asked about the position of Unison on the closure stated, “They are just taking a back seat.” She had been transferred from nearby Altrincham hospital seven years ago after cuts had forced the closure of hospital wards. A three-year legal campaign was mounted against the closure of the rehabilitation wards for the elderly, with the High Court ruling in 2006 that local health bosses had acted unlawfully by failing to consult the public. The wards were not reopened.

A young nurse referred to the driving down of pay and conditions and the impact of hospital closures elsewhere in Greater Manchester: “They are making cuts all over. They built a £50 million hospital in Rochdale, and then, after a few years, they shut it down.”

Rochdale Infirmary closed its doors to emergency 999 ambulances in 2011 when its A&E unit was shut and replaced by an urgent care centre along similar lines to what is planned for Trafford General.

The nurse is an NHS “bank” worker, working for the NHS on zero hour contracts as part of the growing casualisation of the workforce. In response to the call for independent action committees to fight the creation of the pay cartel, she stated, “I agree they are lowering pay and conditions everywhere. Everyone is getting cuts.”

An ambulance worker said closing the A&E unit and diverting patients to other hospitals would put lives at risk. He noted that in the case of Wythenshawe hospital, it is at least a 13-mile trip.

He said the private sector had got its hands on another

part of the NHS with the recent decision to award Greater Manchester’s Patient Transport Service contract to the bus and train operator Arriva. Patients include the elderly and disabled, so trained and experienced staff are critical to providing a proper service.

The local media has reported that Arriva won the contract for Greater Manchester on the basis of undercutting the North West Ambulance Service by £3.5 million a year.

The worker was aware of the South West pay cartel and said that NHS staff in Manchester had sought transfers to the region because it had previously been considered a better place to work. He had resigned from Unison two years ago.

He called the Unison branch representative over to explain the union’s position on the closure of A&E unit. The union representative stated that the ambulance service was not in the same branch as hospital staff, but “assumed” they were opposed.

He went on to promote the upcoming Trades Union Congress demonstration on October 20 and the promise that Labour Party shadow health secretary Andy Burnham had made at the Unison conference to repeal the Health and Social Care Act.

The SEP team explained that the TUC demonstration was aimed at providing a cover for its cooperation all year round with the imposition of austerity, and that any commitment from Labour was empty given its responsibility for extending privatisation in the NHS and initiating the £20 billion in cuts now being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal coalition.



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